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SUBJECT: IRELAND BASKS IN RYDER CUP AFTERGLOW

¶1. Ireland is basking this week in the success of the September 22-24 Ryder Cup golf tournament held outside Dublin, an event that brought unprecedented international exposure to the country as a tourist destination and economic success. According to Failte Ireland, the state tourism agency, the match's television broadcast was available to 1.3 billion people worldwide, and 50-75,000 foreigners visited the K Club tournament venue and Dublin during the weekend. Roughly half of the visitors were U.S. citizens, including a number of high-profile personages, such as former Presidents Bush and Clinton, and Michael Jordan. Based on early figures, Failte Ireland estimates that the tournament generated euro 130 million, taking into account earnings primarily from restaurants, hotels, pubs, public transport, merchandisers, and air carriers. The sum represents a huge windfall on the euro 4.5 million in Irish exchequer funds that were used to secure the event in 1998 with Ryder Cup LTD (a combination of the European and U.S. PGA organizations) and the euro 9 million that Failte Ireland and select Irish company sponsors spent on the event this year.

¶2. More than a golf match, the Ryder Cup was an opportunity to showcase Ireland as a "fully matured, economically confident" travel destination that was capable of hosting major international events, Paul Keely, Failte Ireland Director of Marketing, told Pol/Econ Chief on September 26. Keely noted that, through the first six months of the year, the number of visitors and the amount of tourism earnings were up roughly 10 percent in both categories over the same period in 2005. (Last year, there were approximately 7 million visits by foreign citizens to Ireland and euro 4.3 billion in total tourism/travel earnings.) The hope now, said Keely, was to parlay global media coverage of the Ryder Cup into a bigger bump over the next year for the tourism/services industry, which employs approximately 11 percent of the Irish work force. As much as Ireland rooted for the winning European Ryder Cup team, he quipped, a closer match that would have held TV audiences through the final Sunday would have been a bigger plus for Irish tourism.

¶3. Comment: Two-way tourism between the United States and Ireland, long fueled by family ties, has been one of the key links in traditionally strong U.S.-Irish relations. Last year, roughly one million U.S. citizens visited Ireland, an astounding number for a country of only four million. The graciousness of the U.S. Ryder Cup team, particularly captain Tom Lehman, and of U.S. celebrities during a score of Ryder Cup-related social events created a feel-good factor about bilateral ties that has probably not been seen since the immediate post-9/11 period. Ireland hopes that the event will sustain if not increase the number of U.S. visitors, particularly at a time when travel to more distant and perceptibly exotic destinations becomes available to Americans through the low-cost air service phenomenon.

KENNY